

THE ACT OF THINKING¹ AS PURE ACT
GIOVANNI GENTILE
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1 Faith in Truth

There is no philosophical or scientific inquiry, there is no thinking of any kind without faith in thinking as itself or as its own value, without spontaneous and unyielding conviction of thinking the truth. The skeptic, who thinks he has cut this faith off at the root by suspending judgment – as the only reasonable alternative left to his thinking – halts in the unshaken certainty that his suspension is reasonable and, since he continues to think, he lives on faith in this stubborn and empty thought of his.

The fact of thinking, and therefore of the philosophy that is the solution at which thinking aims, presupposes this affirmation of the truth of thinking in thinking what it actually thinks.

2 Abstract Thinking and Concrete Thinking

Thinking, whose truth is affirmed by the foregoing considerations – the only thinking whose truth can be affirmed since, in fact, it is the only thinking that really is thinking – is not abstract thinking but concrete thinking. And the difficulty that ordinarily conceals from the philosopher's consciousness the obvious truth stated above consists in looking for thinking in abstract thinking rather than in concrete thinking: for example, when we call thinking the thinking of another or our own thinking already thought or, in either case, we call it not real thinking in the proper sense but only the object of thinking in its abstract objectivity.

3 The First Moment of Abstract Thinking

I said '*abstract objectivity*.' I mean that the objectivity attributed in this case to thinking as object of our thinking is not, in its turn, the concrete objectivity that in fact confers itself on thinking by affirming it, by thinking it, in other words, but is an inadequate interpretation of this objectivity through an effort of abstraction. Another's thinking is not something we can think, even by willing to think it as another's, except by thinking it as thinking, by meaning it, or by discerning and recognizing its value and, in other, perhaps provisional, terms, by agreeing to it and making it ours.

¹The word 'thinking' in the title translates the infinitive *pensare*, but in the text Gentile's most frequent choice is the noun *pensiero*, almost always rendered here as 'thinking'; lexical entries for *il pensiero* include 'thought,' 'way of thinking,' 'intention,' 'idea,' 'mind,' 'anxiety,' 'care' and 'attention.' Gentile emphasizes the active force of the word, meaning something more energetic than the English 'thought,' which in the translation sometimes represents *pensato*, the past participle of *pensare*, indicating an act (*atto*) of thinking (*pensiero*) which has already been thought (*pensato*) and is therefore past (*passato*) and not actual (*attuale*).

Our own thinking, once thought, is not thought again except inasmuch as it comes back to life in actual thinking – in other words, only inasmuch as it is not thinking on one occasion, distinct from present thinking, but actual thinking itself, at least provisionally. Hence, to think a thought (or to posit thinking objectively) is to realize it, or rather to negate it in its abstract objectivity by affirming it in a concrete objectivity that is not beyond the subject since it is in virtue of the act of this subject.

4 The Second Moment of Abstract Thought

But this is a first moment of thinking another's thought, or our own when it is no longer our own (past). If this moment were never overcome, the thinking of another would be (through us) only our own, and past thinking would be only present. We would know only our own actual thinking. Behind the first moment stands another, and we will soon (§18) see why. Here it suffices to note that if this second moment, *made possible by the first*, annuls the actuality of the other's thinking or of our own thinking that is no longer our own, it is in a new act of thinking that it annuls. Thereby realized in terms of the new thinking, ours and actual, is the new objectivity (the true and effective objectivity) conferred on the thinking that our thinking expels from itself and accordingly treats as objective. And this objectivity is an organic element of the immanent unity of this thinking.

5 Thinking Absolutely Actual or Ours

Therefore, what one calls the thinking of another or our own thinking in the past is, in a first moment, our own actual thinking and, in a second moment, a part of our actual thinking, an inseparable part of the whole to which it belongs and therefore real in the unity of the whole itself. Hence, *the only concrete thinking is our actual thinking*. And since our non-actual thinking is no longer ours, one may say that only concrete thinking is *absolutely our* thinking (but see in its context the meaning of this *We* as subject of our thinking). Equally may one say that only concrete thinking is *absolutely actual* thinking since thinking that is not ours is not actual thinking.

6 Thinking as Nature

In consequence of the preceding considerations, the passage from the first to the second of the moments described above – by which one thinks a thought that is not our actual thinking – implies the devaluation of thinking as thinking: that is, the affirmation that what we have thought (in the first moment) is not thinking since it is not concrete thinking, is not absolutely our thinking; or the affirmation that what we have thought is now not thinking but, on the contrary, the negation of thinking, the extension of the Cartesians, nature, the unthinkable, the limit of thinking, that which thinking cannot penetrate because it has already penetrated it. (For example, *'the uncancelled days'* of

Ermengarda, or Francesca's memory 'in misery of the happy time'²: spiritual states turned to stone in the past, ineluctable, inexorable, as harsh as the most grievous laws of nature, more painful because more deaf to the voice of the spirit.)

The passage from the first to the second moment is the passage from thinking to nature. Nature, therefore, taken in its concrete reality, is the thinking that thinking begins to think as other than itself, or thinking fixed in its abstractness.

Nature is abstract; only thinking is concrete (cf. §9).

7 Error

Thinking that is absolutely ours or absolutely actual is true precisely because it is ours or actual. *Error* comes from thinking that cannot be thought, from what another thinks and we cannot think or what we have already thought but now can think no longer. What we actually think, if we think it, we think as truth. (Or else we think error, as error, but thinking that it is error and thus thinking the truth.)

And error is not an accidental attribute of another's thought or of thought no longer our own; indeed, it is necessary.

If we call this non-actual thinking 'nature,' in place of the naturalist motto, *Natura sive Deus*,³ we must substitute the idealist motto, *Natura sive error*.⁴ The reason that this thinking is not actual, as we have seen (§4), is that it has been overcome, because having thought it, in other words, we can no longer think it. And by continuing to live as thinking beings, we must think the other. What now can no longer be thought, after having been thought, is just what error is.

Error is abstract, then; only truth is concrete.

²Dante placed Francesca da Rimini with the lustful in the second circle of Hell; her betrothed killed her when he caught her with his younger brother, Paolo. In reply to Dante's pitying question about her fate, Francesca answers that 'there is no greater pain than in misery to remember the happy time': *Inferno*, 5.121-3. The other quotation, referring to Ermengarda in Alessandro Manzoni's tragedy *Adelchi* (1822), is from the chorus that closes the first scene of the fourth act:

In the sleepless shadows
Through lonely cloisters
Amidst the chanting of the virgins
To the entreated altars,
The uncanceled days
Always return in thinking.

³Nature or God; cf. Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, preface.

⁴Nature or error.

8 The Principle of Identity and the Dialectical Law

If error is the thinking that cannot be thought, truth is the thinking that cannot not be thought: two necessities, which are only one necessity. *Verum norma sui et falsi.*⁵ Yet thinking thinks itself inasmuch as it thinks itself necessarily, which is to say, inasmuch as we think that it is not possible to think otherwise. Every act of thinking is an exclusion of another act of thinking (not of all the other possible acts, but of the one thought immediately before). *Omnis determinatio est negatio.*⁶ And therefore only by my becoming aware of an error and freeing myself from it do I know a truth – and think, in other words. In this living bond that joins (concrete) truth to (abstract) error is the root of thinking and the fundamental law of logic. The necessity expressed by the old logic in the law of *identity* is an abstract necessity, and likewise abstract was the thinking or the truth at which that logic aimed, winding through a maze of contradictions. The principle of identity (or of contradiction), $A = A$, declares a necessity pertinent to what has been called abstract thinking, to nature, in other words, which, by definition, is the negation of thinking and thus cannot admit to itself any kind of logical law. $A = A$ is the law of error in its abstractness. Hence, whatever might have been thought according to such a law would for that very reason be error. There is no thinking, in fact, that resolves itself into $A = A$.

Logical necessity belongs to the real or concrete process of thinking which instead could be formulated schematically as $A = \text{not } A$. In fact, every act of thinking is a negation of an act of thinking, a present in which the past dies, and thus a unity of these two moments. Take away the present, and you will have the past blind (abstract nature); take away the past, and you will have the present empty (abstract thinking or another nature). Truth does not come from the being that is but from the being that annuls itself and, by annulling itself, really is. This proposition is unthinkable as long as thinking is taken to be abstract thinking, where being, having been fixed, can only be. On the other hand, this proposition cannot not be thought if by thinking one means concrete thinking, absolutely actual thinking (whence the truth of the concept of becoming cannot be grasped except for that true becoming which is thinking – the dialectic).

The principle of identity should be replaced, therefore, not by the equally abstract principle of becoming, pure and simple, but by the principle of the dialectic or of thinking as activity that posits itself by negating itself.

The principle, then, is not the abolition of the principle of identity but rather its authentication since the dialectic denies not the truth of truth but the fixity of truth and thus affirms that the truth is itself – but in its movement.

⁵Truth is its own rule and also the rule of the false.

⁶All determination is negation.

9 The Freedom of Thinking

The dialectical necessity of thinking coincides with the freedom of thinking because all limits are produced by the same dialectic of thinking. The limit of thinking cannot be a limit of thinking (§6) unless it starts by being thinking itself, unless, as limit, it is in the sphere of thinking itself. Nature – the only possible limit of thinking – is nature only abstractly; in the concrete it is thinking in its internal mediation.

10 The Universality of Thinking

Absolutely actual thinking is universal by its very necessity.

The universality of Plato and of Aristotle (parallel to the identity of every concept with itself), the kind desired by the realists and fought by the nominalists, is abstract universality because it is the universality of abstract thinking. One cannot speak of the universality of the concept of *man*, of *animal*, of *triangle*, of *number* because there are no such concepts either in heaven or on earth; instead, there is the thinking that thinks these concepts. And the thinking of these concepts cannot be thinking in general, divine thinking (of a God that is other than us), if the only concrete thinking is absolutely our thinking. The only thinkable universality, then, is that of our act of thinking. It is an act universal in the sense that, inasmuch as it is necessary, the act posits itself as the thinking not of a particular thinker from whom other thinkers, also being particulars, may diverge, but rather as the thinking of one who thinks through all. When Galileo writes,

taking understanding *intensive*,⁷ inasmuch as this term implies understanding any proposition intensively or perfectly, in other words, [he says] that the human intellect thus understands some of them [namely, all of them that it does understand] perfectly, and therefore of these it has absolute certainty, as much as nature itself has.⁸

You should refer this passage to the universality of actual thinking in its necessity. But Galileo adds

such are the pure mathematical sciences, geometry and arithmetic, of which the divine intellect certainly knows infinitely more propositions [another's thinking (§4,6), which instead is the negation of thinking] because it knows them all, yet I believe that the knowledge of those few that are understood by the human intellect equals the divine in objective certainty since it comes to grasp the necessity beyond which, it seems, there can be no greater security.⁹

⁷*Intensively* in contrast to *extensively*; Galileo's point is that intensive understanding is much greater in humans than extensive understanding, but Gentile, bracketing his comments on Galileo's words, also puns on the Italian *intendere* (to understand) and the Latin *intensive*.

⁸Galileo, *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems, Ptolemaic and Copernican*, trans. S. Drake (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), p. 103; *Opere*, ed. naz., VII, 128.

⁹*Ibid.*

And one should say, on the contrary, that not only pure mathematics but all our thinking (even the most useless trifles) is real in the act that thinks itself.

11 The Empirical I and the Absolute I

If thinking is ours inasmuch as it is universal, if there are others or another only in terms of an abstraction, like that of thinking in its abstract objectivity, then thinking does not arise from our individuality. But our individuality, if it is ours because it is deepest within us, or better because it is deepest, present to itself, is universal – indeed, the universal concentrated and therefore made real in the One of consciousness. The We as subject of our thinking is not the I that has the not-I (another) or I-others (others) opposed to it, and hence it is not the empirical I visible, one among many, to psychological observation. It is the absolute I, the One as I. It negates itself not only as thinking about things and I-others (note: *about* others, not *belonging to* I-others) but also as thinking about the self empirically conceived, as an I among many Is or among things, since an I of this sort is a particular among particulars and thus no longer that universal which is the true I. That particular I in which the I negates itself (and must negate itself) is nature, not thinking. True idealism cannot be solipsist, then, because it has overcome the position of solipsism (a concept of the world closed within the particular *ipse*).¹⁰

12 The Eternity of Thinking and Time

Thinking in its actuality, or as universal I, contains and therefore overcomes not only the spatiality of pure nature but also the temporality of pure natural happening. Thinking is eternal, beyond time. Time in fact is a form of what we think and therefore of thinking as having been thought in its abstract objectivity. When, in the act of thinking it, we attend to what we think, all points of time, distinct and successive, merge and contract into a single and unmultipliable point.

To read a book, hours and hours will be needed; beyond the first will come the second, beyond the second the third, and so on – and the reverse. But anyone who gets to the end and does not think the whole book together by holding all of it present does not understand, does not think that book. And what belongs to the totality, once the series of time is used up, belongs to every part at the corresponding point of time. Taking this into account, thinking – inasmuch as it is thinking – is what is all at once, all present together in a single instant. And therefore the instant, the *εἰς ἑαυτὴν*,¹¹ of thinking is not an instant among instants, is not in time, has no before nor after, is eternal. And therefore every act of thinking in all its absolute forms – philosophical system, poem, flashing and fleeting intuition – realizes itself as something eternal whose value was not born and will not die.

¹⁰He himself.

¹¹All of a sudden.

13 The Unity of Thinking and Number

Absolutely actual thinking, or absolute I, since it is not subject to time, is not subject to number. *Incipis numerare, incipis errare.*¹² Number is not on this account a simple *auxilium imaginationis*¹³ except inasmuch as one aims to fix before the mind the process of the dialectic eternally unraveling its moments. Number is legitimate abstraction where one refers to abstract reality (nature, or thinking in its pure objectivity). Nature, because it is negation of thinking, is negation of unity, and hence it is number. Thus it is negation of freedom – mechanism, in other words. Multiplicity, abstractly considered as pure multiplicity, cannot be understood except mechanically. Accordingly, nature is conceived deterministically as subject to the category of causality.

14 The Solution of the Antinomies

Nature, multiple and mechanical precisely because it is abstract, is a reality, object of an abstract science (particular science) not of the concrete (philosophical) science. And the solution of all the antinomies pointed out by Kant is discovered immediately as soon as one notices the abstractness of nature or of the world viewed in its pure objectivity. This world of time and space is necessarily finite because it is necessarily particular. It contains no simple element because its law is multiplicity. Since number demands unity as its element, multiplicity would be hopeless if unity in the domain of the multiple had to be an absolute unity instead of a provisional and therefore arbitrary unity, exactly as the determination of the particular can be, deferring the problem to the concept of another particular. Thus, the series of causes in a mechanical (not philosophical) system has a principle that makes determination possible, but this principle is not absolute because it is relative to a particular reality that always has another one behind and next to it. And in short there is nothing necessary in the world because everything is particular and so everything is conditioned. The force of logic that posits against each thesis its antithesis overcomes the abstractness of the Kantian world and will discover exactly that concrete reality to which it belongs as antithesis. It passes from the world of facts, which are many and nothing other than many (belonging to a multiplicity that contradicts itself as soon as one wants to think it absolutely), to the world of the *act* that is one, as root of the many.

15 Thinking as Will

The act, if it is not to be converted into a fact, must be grasped in its actual nature of pure act; it can only be thinking. The fact is the negation of thinking, the same thinking from which nature, its other, is created.

¹²Begin to count and begin to go wrong.

¹³Aid to imagination.

Once having descended from the act to the fact, one is outside of thought, in the world of nature. There are no spiritual facts, only acts; indeed, there is nothing that is not the act of the spirit, which in itself undergoes no opposition of any sort. Will (emotionality or practical activity) as opposed to thinking can only be other than thinking, other than thinking itself, not as act but as fact – what has already been thought and thus has become nature.

16 Absolute Immanence

If beyond this other-than-thinking that is past thinking (logically, not chronologically past), more or less remote, another were posited as opposed to thinking in its origin, it would *eo ipso*¹⁴ be stripped of all its essential attributes, from unity up to truth, on and on, through all the attributes already exhibited,. And it would no longer be thinking. *Cogito, ergo sum. Sum substantia cogitans. Quatenus substantia, in me sum et per me concipior: hoc est, mei conceptus non indiget conceptu alterius rei a quo formari debeat.*¹⁵ Nothing, in short, transcends thinking. Thinking is absolute immanence.

17 Potency and the Principle of Sufficient Reason

Outside of actual thinking there is no *altera res*,¹⁶ neither actually nor potentially: not actually because of the preceding consideration; not potentially – in other words, as potency of the act which is absolutely our thinking – because potency is a category that can have a meaning through the world of facts, nature, generation and corruption, not in the world of the act that is eternal. As *possibility* – Leibniz is correct – it needs to be completed by sufficient reason in order to pass into act. But this sufficient reason is other than possible, and this otherness implies multiplicity, which is the category of facts, of the universe. The principle of sufficient reason has its place in Leibnizian pluralism (which, like all the old metaphysics, is precisely a conception of the world of facts or of thought in its abstract objectivity), but it has no meaning in an idealistic monism of the absolute act or *sub specie aeternitatis*.¹⁷

The principle of sufficient reason, completing that of identity, supposes the latter to be true, and hence it is on the same level: it too is false. From possibility to sufficient reason there is a leap that breaks the *lex continui*¹⁸ at its roots. And virtuality is a compromise. The true act cannot be transcended. And Leibnizian virtuality, when it becomes the Kantian category or form, will be pure act precisely.

18 The Process of Thinking

¹⁴For this very reason.

¹⁵I think, therefore I am. I am a thinking substance. Inasmuch as I am substance, I am in myself, and I am conceived through myself: that is, the concept of me does not need a concept of another thing by which to be formed. Spinoza ??? Not in *Meditations*.

¹⁶Other thing.

¹⁷Under the form of eternity.

¹⁸Law of the continuous.

The act of the I is consciousness inasmuch as it is self-consciousness: the object of the I is the I itself. Every cognitive process is an act of self-consciousness. This is not abstract identity and immobility but rather concrete act. If it were something identical, inert, it would need another to be moved. But that would annihilate its freedom. Its movement is not a *posterius*¹⁹ in relation to its being; it coincides with the being. Self-consciousness is the same movement or process.

As originating or absolute process, it does not need to be made other. It is otherness within: not being, but being that bends back on itself, thus negating itself as being. A thing (abstractly considered, fixed by abstraction) is (always that), but precisely for that reason it is not thinking – self-consciousness, in other words. We have not consented to stop at that abstraction, as has been seen. As soon as the spirit stops or seems to stop, the voice of logic is quick to cry out, ‘what laziness, what is this delay?’ It needs to move, to enter into the concrete, into the eternal process of thinking. And here being moves in a circle, turning back on itself and thus annihilating itself as being. Here is its life, its becoming: thinking. It is not pure thesis nor pure antithesis, not being and not non-being, but synthesis, that singular act that we are – Thinking. Being (thesis) in its abstraction is nothing, or rather nothing to do with thinking (which is the true being). But this thinking that is eternal is never preceded by its own nothing. In fact, this nothing is posited by it, and, because it is a nothing of thinking, it is thinking of nothing, or rather thinking – everything, in other words. It is not the thesis that makes the synthesis possible, but the reverse: the synthesis makes the thesis possible, creating it along with its antithesis or rather creating itself. And therefore the pure act is self-creation.

19 Philosophy and History

The real, therefore, is self-creation because it is thinking. Thinking is the first dawn of consciousness (every psychic fact *inasmuch as it is* consciousness, inasmuch as it is act, in other words). Thinking is the whole of consciousness, including philosophy. Hence, it has two essential moments: first, it is reality, that reality which is thinking (by which all forms of skepticism are annulled), and the same thing in reality celebrates its own inwardness; second, it is concept, thinking, consciousness of reality, and thus intrinsic overcoming of the prior moment. It is being and the consciousness of being, life and the mirror of life, and it is that in conformity with the essence of the pure act (self-creation) in general, being *inasmuch as it is* consciousness of being. And if the process of reality, that infinite and eternal dialectic which is thinking, is *history*, then philosophy is history and overcomes history by reflecting on it. It is history that lives in history’s thinking – thinking, please note, always as pure act, and therefore never to be limited by the empirical determinations of history shattered in space and time – our thinking, but absolutely *ours* because it is absolutely *actual*.

¹⁹An after.

